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FOR NEA/MAG (SWILLIAMS, MNARDI, VSTEWART)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/03/2018  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [PINR](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIA'S UPPER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT, A FORUM FOR  
PLAYING FAVORITES

REF: A. TUNIS 958  
[1](#)B. 07 TUNIS 753

Classified By: Charge Marc L. Desjardins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (SBU): Following the August 10 elections for the regional and union members of Tunisia's Chamber of Advisors, President Ben Ali appointed 20 other new members. Included among Ben Ali's appointments was Mohamed Chandoul, a senior leader of the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT), who agreed to join despite the union's steadfast refusal to nominate candidates to their allotted 14 seats in the Chamber. The UGTT has refused to participate because the election process is not transparent and the members are not independent. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) The Chamber of Advisors, the upper house of the legislature, was established in 2005 with 126 members serving six year terms. Of the members, 41 are appointed by Ben Ali, 43 are elected to represent the regions by local government representatives, and 42 are allocated, 14 each, to the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce, and Artisans (UTICA) and the National Farmers Union (both close to the government) and the General Union for Tunisian Workers (UGTT). The Chamber only has 112 members currently because the 14 UGTT seats were never filled. The 2008 elections are the second in the Chamber's history as the body moves to create an election rhythm where half the members are changed every three years.

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Co-opting the Opposition  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) This year half of the sitting members (56) had to give up their seats (chosen by lottery) to make room for new elections. Several commentators predicted that most of those who gave up their seats would be either re-elected or appointed by Ben Ali because the Chamber of Advisors serves, in part, as a public forum to recognize people of particular prominence, such as former Ministers, local leaders, and leaders of important organizations. Of the 20 presidentially appointed members who had to give up their seats as part of the lottery, 15 were re-appointed by Ben Ali. Of interest were Moncef Matri, the father of Ben Ali's son-in-law, Ridha Mellouli, a well-known pro government journalist, Aziz Miced, businessman and member of the ruling RCD party Central Committee, and Fanter Hassen, who holds the Ben Ali Chair for Religious Dialogue Between Civilizations at the University of Tunis. Finally, Naziha Zarrouk, who was the second vice-president of the Chamber and had occupied an elected seat, was named by Ben Ali to an appointed seat.

¶4. (SBU) The appointment that generated the most reaction was Mohamed Chandoul, the Deputy Secretary General of the UGTT. In May the UGTT met to discuss its options for the upcoming Council of Advisors elections and decided once again to sustain their boycott. The UGTT protests that the system is not transparent because it is required to name 24 nominees for review and 14 are then selected by the political parties, the ruling RCD party in particular. The UGTT not only objected to the election process but to the fact that it was allocated the same number of seats as the two much smaller, less prominent UTICA and the National Farmers Unions.

¶5. (SBU) By appointing Chandoul as one of his 21 candidates, President Ben Ali circumvented the UGTT's boycott. Al-Mowqif, the PDP weekly journal reported that the UGTT management received numerous comments from the membership protesting Chandoul's acceptance of the position. In response, the Administrative Council of the UGTT met September 3 and issued a statement that Chandoul would serve on the Chamber of Advisors in a purely personal capacity and would not represent the UGTT. Of the rest of the President's appointees, the other two notable names were Mohamed Moaada, one of the founders of the opposition MDS party who was imprisoned from 1997 to 2002, and Mondher Thabet, Secretary General of the Social Liberal Party (PSL). Both parties have endorsed Ben Ali's re-election in 2009.

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Comment  
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¶6. (C) In the last three years the Chamber of Advisors has proven to be another rubber stamp institution. Although it does debate the merits of legislation submitted by the government, it has not initiated any legislation and inevitably agrees to government proposals. The President's appointment of Chandoul was intended to sow some dissension within the UGTT and succeeded. Similarly, it is possible that the appointment of Moaada is intended to exacerbate the tension in the Socialist Democratic Movement (Ref A) between him and current Secretary General Boulahia. End Comment.

DESJARDINS